STREAMING STRUGGLES

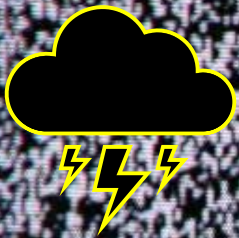
An Argument for the Preservation of Physical Media in the Digital Age

By Ben Hall

Streaming has become a multibillion-dollar industry over the last decade. From Netflix to Tubi, these services offer unparalleled convenience for film and television consumers. This convenience, however, does not come without a cost. Physical media is very important to the preservation of film and television, but thanks to the streaming industry, this medium is on a steady decline. This zine is intended to highlight both advantages of physical media that are often overlooked and how the streaming industry is screwing over workers, artists, and **us**, the viewers. I'm not here to shame you into cancelling all of your streaming services (I myself am a streaming customer, and I would not ask you to do something I wouldn't do). I just hope that after reading this you may consider shifting time and money away from the Hulus and the Fubos, and over to a medium that is dying a slow and tragic death.

The Convenience Factor

As mentioned before, streaming services are extremely convenient for consumers. This is a fact that cannot be argued; however, I would pose that physical media ownership comes with conveniences of its own. For example, in 2018 a hurricane knocked out power and internet in a Floridian neighborhood. Without streaming, the DVD collections and portable DVD players of residents suddenly became valuable commodities in the neighborhood.[1]



The convenience of physical media is different from that of streaming services. When you buy a DVD or Blu-Ray, you **own** it. You don't need internet access, you just need a device that can play your media.

The Advertisement/Price Factors

There is a dilemma that us subscribers are faced with too often: do we pay the extra price tag to remove ads, or do we suck it up and have our content routinely interrupted by the same three ads? It is an unfair situation that we are put in, as ads are annoying but ad-free services jack up prices to ridiculous levels.

Say for example, you're subscribed to Netflix, Hulu, and Max. If you wanted to use these services ad-free, it would run you $51.47 **before** tax every month.[2,3,4] That's what we in the industry call highway robbery.

With that $51.47, you could buy the complete collection of *the Office* on DVD, brand new, own it forever, and **still** have money left over. If you chose to buy from a secondhand store, you could save exponentially more money.

The Quality Factor

Picture quality on streaming is inconsistent at best; you really are at the mercy of your internet provider. I’m sure we’ve all experienced interruptions from a dip in internet speed resulting in that dreaded “buffering” message, or sudden drops in picture quality that make world-class films look like they were filmed with a Motorola Razor.

Because physical media doesn’t rely on internet connections, you always get what you pay for. Video and audio quality stays consistent, and (assuming your discs stay clean and well maintained) interruptions simply do not occur.

Where is my money going?

Who knows! Streaming services lack a reliable or widely used system to measure success of their individual shows/films. This issue was central to the WGA and SAG AFTRA strikes of 2023 because workers and artists are given no transparency for how their residual checks are calculated and paid out.[5] This has also brought the long-term profitability of streaming into question. Meanwhile, CEOs like Warner Bros Discovery's David Zaslav get to run around merging companies, holding lavish dinner parties, and cancelling the release of entire films that have **finished the filming process.**[6]

The advantages of buying physical media in this context are twofold. Buying new copies contributes to residual earnings for artists and workers. Choosing to buy secondhand copies from local stores puts that money directly back into your local community.

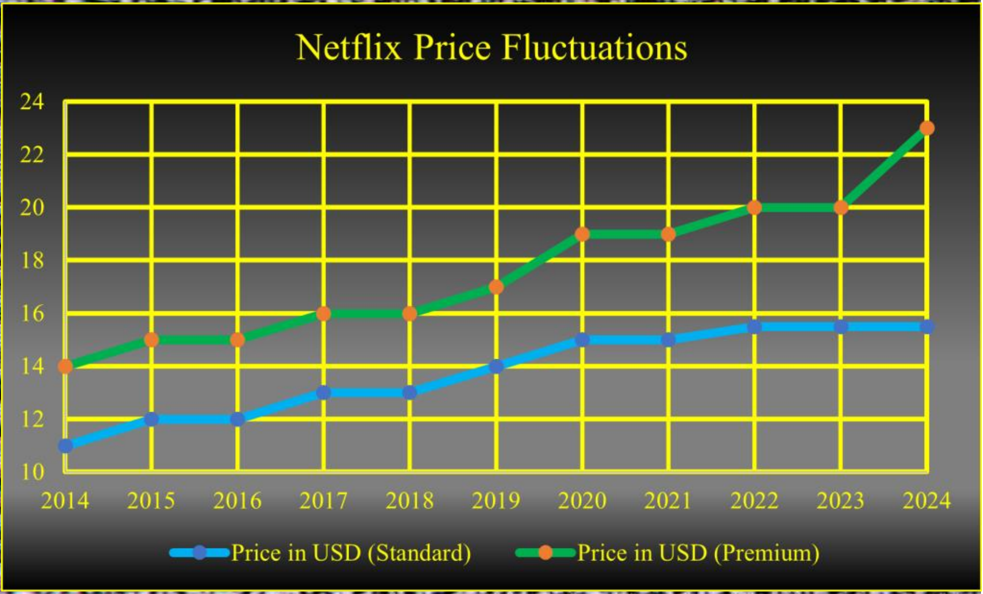
The Permanence Factor

If you remember anything about when *the Office* was moved from Netflix to the (at the time) new service Peacock, it's likely how mad fans were at the prospect of switching to a new service to watch their favorite comfort show.

Unfortunately, this is both not uncommon or even the worst of it. Services routinely change their libraries, moving content around and sometimes even removing content with no streaming alternative available. While discs are not permanent, as long as they remain well maintained they can last practically forever. Many places even offer disc resurfacing services for under $10, further adding to their longevity.

Policy and Price Changes

Nothing is immune to inflation, especially streaming services. This graph demonstrates how the price of Netflix's standard and premium services have steadily risen over the last decade.[7]



In 2023, Netflix also restricted the ability for people to share accounts with people outside of a household[8], further complicating an already strained relationship with their users.

Quality and Mass Production

From 2012 to 2019, the number of new scripted shows produced in Hollywood ballooned from 288 to 532.[5] This "quantity over quality" philosophy has led to an oversaturated market of content. Many such shows are unceremoniously canceled after one season due to lack of interest. I'd be surprised if anyone remembers *Girlboss* (2017), *Daybreak* (2019), or *Everything Sucks* (2018).[9] These were not necessarily bad shows; rather, these were pieces of content that were forced to compete with literal hundreds of other shows. This business practice does a disservice to the workers and artists who put their time, energy, and love into these projects.

Conclusion

The streaming industry has irreversibly changed the way films and shows are produced and consumed. In my opinion, these changes have brought about more harm than good. Workers are routinely screwed over and consumers are spending money on digital services that are simply not as good as they could or should be. Many of you reading this likely grew up with DVD or Blu-Ray players, or even remember the death of the VCR. If you've drifted away from these media formats, I hope that after reading this you will consider divesting your time, attention, and money away from these services over to the world of physical media. If you're already a physical media enthusiast, consider passing this zine along to someone you know who isn't.

Sources

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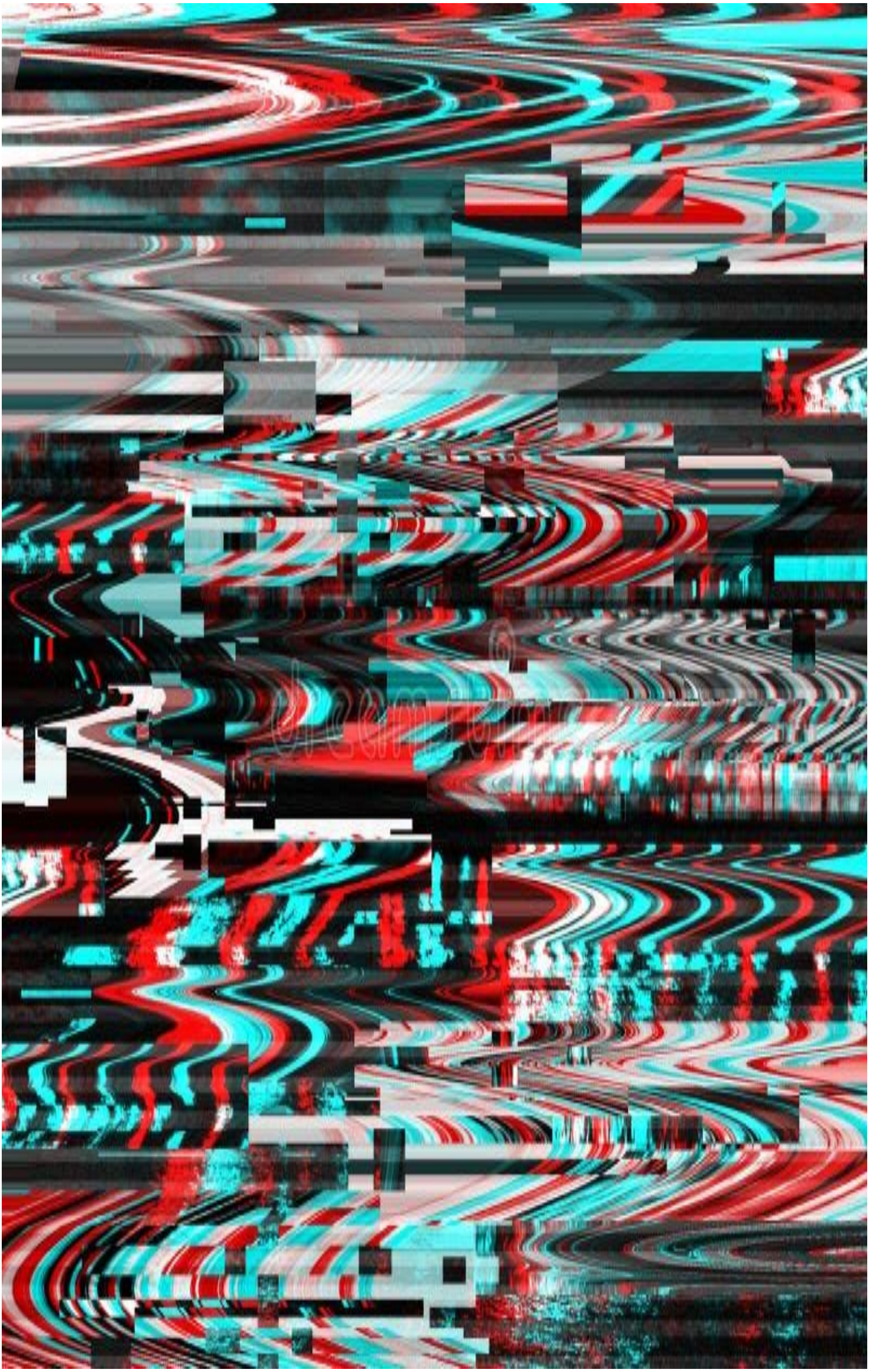
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